

CAN WE TALK?

For your next presentation, skip the bullet points and start a dialogue.

BY CHERYL REID-SIMONS

BLAME IT ON YOUR SMARTPHONE. Or Facebook. Or maybe TED Talks. Whatever the culprit, the traditional conference staple—keynote—or really any kind of lecture—is hopelessly dated. Welcome to the interactive era. Conversational presentations are the key to building and maintaining interest, because today’s audiences don’t just want to have a dialogue, they expect it.

“All of us who are in business have so much competition now in terms of [grabbing and holding] people’s attention,” says Portland-based public speaking coach Gigi Rosenberg. “If we’re not riveting, people will just change the channel. When there was less competition, you didn’t have to be as on your toes. ... Now you have to be if you really want to survive.”

“A few years ago, people sat and listened, and they didn’t have devices,” says Connie Miller of Seattle’s Pivotal Presentations. “If they weren’t interested, they might read the newspaper or be writing notes. The shift toward a high level of audience participation has been fascinating.”



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A conversational presentation often seems less formal than a traditional speech. But don't let the casual vibe fool you. Being conversational actually requires more preparation than a traditional talk. "If you are presenting your material conversationally, you need to have a really firm grasp of the material," says Seattle certified professional coach Kathryn Crawford Saxer. "There is no winging it. Winging it is all bad. I don't care how articulate you are."

Saxer says audiences find conversational presentations "a huge relief" because it helps them pay attention. "It's much easier to listen to someone who is talking to you conversationally," she says. "You get and retain more information if it's interactive, rather than just digesting your lunch and trying not to fall asleep."

There are other benefits as well. "Instead of just having presenters presenting, you have the whole audience busy, engaged, discussing and coming up with new ideas," she says. "The unexpected can emerge, which can be extremely valuable."

While TED Talks are not truly conversations since they don't feature audience interaction, they feel conversational. "When you're actually engaging with audience members and creating a climate of conversation, audience members feel paid attention to and listened to themselves even though they might not be speaking," says Miller.

TED Talks feel conversational in part because presenters don't rely on notes or slides to tell their story. It's the speech version of working without a net and requires immense preparation. "[Speakers] really spend months having a committee help them develop their presentation," says Miller. "After that, they are rehearsed intensively so they have memorized their talk."

Asking anyone to fully memorize a 20- to 30-minute presentation is daunting. But there are tips to help. "A technique called 'the memory palace' will help with memorization," Saxer says. "Major events in your life, you can tell me exactly where you were," she



Connie Miller (standing) of Seattle's Pivotal Presentations

says. "Good stuff, bad stuff, you remember by location." So after carefully writing a presentation, Saxer will tie it to geographic locations. "You take the introduction and you start it by your front door. Then the next idea you rehearse by your armchair," she says. "You move through your house. ... Each idea is anchored in a location."

Saxer aims for what she calls the "happy-birthday song" memorization level. "That's when it's gotten so deeply memorized I don't have to think about the words," she says. "My brain can be busy making eye contact and responding to unexpected things."

Saxer calls traditional presentations "death by PowerPoint," but she still recommends using visuals. "We're all really trained to have slides, and the audience is trained to see them," she says. "So, I'll put something like a picture of my kittens behind me. Put up interesting photos that somehow relate to the

topic, but no words. Or maybe three words. But no bullet points ever," she says. "I think of the slides more as an illustration."

Rosenberg suggests that instead of saving time at the end for questions and answers, sprinkle those opportunities throughout a presentation. Doing so keeps listeners engaged and helps them absorb and retain more. They aren't distracted by a question they had during the first five minutes of your program. They can be present and in the moment. "But you have to have the confidence to be able to say, 'We're going to move on now,' or you could get off on a tangent and not finish your material."

She also says you can't always know if an audience is deep in thought or simply bored. "Sometimes, if you're really listening, you might be looking at the ground," she says. "But if they're looking at their phones, you've lost them." 📱